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Commentary on: Suzanne McMurphy's "Trust, distrust, and trustworthiness in argumentation: Virtues and fallacies"

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This paper is part of an increasingly rich contribution to argument studies from disciplines studying human interaction in general. The paper is an invitation, rather than an argument, and my response is to accept the invitation. The paper offers current empirical data and theoretical considerations to ground our discussion of trust. It also invites us to consider some specific questions about how argumentation theory might incorporate this new information. I shall offer a preliminary exploration of where this might take us.

Some interesting consequences emerge in the presentation of the empirical data. The historical emergence in the 1960s of trust as a focus of interest coincides surprisingly well with the beginning of a slide away from a belief in rationality as a universal and teachable human capacity (e.g. Scribner, 1977; Hamill, 1990). I'm curious what triggered this renewed interest in trust, and what it might say about our construction of relationships. It is possible that comparing the history of trust studies to the history of argument studies could illuminate shifting ideals from impartial objectivity to interpersonal connections.

The framework of trust is one in which relationships take centre stage. We cannot look at an argument without looking at who has given it, when, and in the context of what relationship. This is not new to argument theory (e.g. Warrenburg, 2009) but it is still a step away from where argument theory likes to focus. It raises the question of how to re-integrate trust and trustworthiness. McMurphy's example is that professionals or politicians may not ask themselves whether they are trustworthy, but only how they can gain the trust of a client or constituent. Is the problem that they are building a one-directional relationship, trying too hard for affective trust, when they should be creating a bi-directional relationship that leaves the client free to develop cognitive trust if appropriate?

To complicate matters, trust's neurobiological component might be created just by the appropriate administration of an oxytocin spray. That prospect has to trouble us as argumentation theorists: if argument cannot prevent misplaced trust, and if trust can be created without the effort of argument, then how can argument influence people's actions? The cited studies of trust in negotiation and in co-operative games reinforce this worry, since they suggest that some goals of negotiation, co-operation, or argument may be unconscious. Argumentation assumes that the goals and structure of an argument are subject to conscious control. If we do engage in behavior which surprises our conscious selves when we

are made aware of it, we'll be fortunate indeed if that behaviour makes us more trustworthy rather than less. (McMurphy, p. 10, citing Baylor study.)

Now to the questions. Trust studies consider how interactions within a relationship can benefit or harm the people and their relationship. If argument is one such interaction, we need more explicit attention to the benefits and harms of argument. I'll look at the questions with this in mind.

The third question on the list is one I can answer quickly and easily:

Should the preservation of trust, or the avoidance of the creation of distrust, be included as a goal of argumentation or within the assessment of a 'good' argument?

An enthusiastic "yes" to this one; this goal is implicitly accepted in the field of argument studies. Manipulation and similar abuses of trust are not good practice. McMurphy's paper is valuable because it shows we have two tasks here, not one. When trust and distrust are not opposite ends on a continuum but can co-exist, we must consider them separately for their impact on argument. We need two sets of recommendations: one to increase trust, and one to decrease distrust.

The second, fifth, and sixth questions on the list are a linked trio with responses already underway in argument studies:

Do we need to trust the individual who puts forth an argument, or can we separate the content of the argument from the person putting forth the argument, such that the person making the argument does not need to be 'trustworthy' but only that the content meet standard expectations of arguments?

Is trust always an element in arguments or can arguments be made where the risk and vulnerability are sufficiently low that trust is not an element?

If part of the role of the "arguer" is to engage their audience in such a way as to gain their trust (Tindale, 2004) what is being requested of those in the 'trustor' position?

...

The field of argument studies has a long history of believing that argument can and should stand independent of emotions and relationships. (e.g. George et al., 2005) One of the traditional aims of teaching argument is to keep everyone properly skeptical of the claims in any argument. They should be prepared to distrust the unsupported claims of a person they trust, and be willing to believe the cogent claims of a person they do not trust. Where trust exists, it should be "cognitive based trust" (McMurphy, p. 5, citing Hardin.) However, the recognition that we often must rely on experts rather than on independent assessment of claims has led to considerable current work on what constitutes properly placed trust in experts and expertise (e.g. Goodwin, 2012).

Whether we deal with experts or just our peers, the issue will be the appropriate balance of actions by both parties to establish trust. Rhetoric may put the burden on both speaker and listener; logic has always put the burden on the listener. The best line of response built on awareness of trust issues is probably to expect both speaker and listener to consider trust, and to be expected to ask about any behavior or claims that appear to jeopardize trust.

So far, McMurphy's invitation to take best advantage of the research being done on multiple dimensions of trust sits well with the scope of argument studies. However, her own discussion of meta-trust raises the very challenging prospect that trust and argument are not natural allies. This is evident in her remaining questions, the seventh, first, and fourth on the list:

If factors in the production of trust can be reduced to individual characteristics of physical chemistry, if you can purchase a nasal spray with oxytocin, how might this influence the role and responsibility of the person in the argument?

How much does the existence and level of trust or distrust in a relationship influence the context and process of an argument?

Given that trust is based upon risk taking in the face of uncertainty, do we need to evaluate arguments based upon their potential harm, or impact on the well-being of the trustor or the person to whom the argument is being made? Does self-respect and autonomy become important elements? If an argument requires that the 'trustor' give up elements of their autonomy or agency in order to engage in the dialogue, what is the responsibility of the person putting forth the argument for assuring that they consider their influence and 'power' over the person they are engaging in a trust relationship?

In these, we have both a dilemma and a much wider question to consider. The dilemma is whether there is value in working on trusting or being trustworthy in arguments if trust is won or lost independently of our effort. But perhaps this is a "morality-based trust" dilemma. Suppose I want to administer oxytocin spray to you so you will trust me. Surely I should first at least give you a good argument why you should take it? Then, surely, you should also have some way to be sure my values and yours coincide with respect to why the chemical trust is a proper way to pursue our goals? We might be able to produce trust without good argument but we ought surely to be able to justify its production by good argument.

More broadly, the invitation to factor in trust reminds us we may need not only to consider whether a particular argument leads to harm or benefit, but also to consider when arguing itself is harmful or beneficial to a relationship. The much wider question that arises is how many more factors beyond trust should also be considered. McMurphy suggests self-respect and autonomy; I would confirm power and add authority.

This paper reminds us there's a much bigger world out there we should continue to explore as part of the practice of good argument.

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